

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

---

### Statement

---

Testimony  
on the  
Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, as amended  
before the  
Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans  
Committee on Resources  
U.S. House of Representatives  
106th Congress  
April 6, 2000  
2:00 p.m.  
1334 Longworth Building  
submitted by  
Lianna Jack  
Executive Director  
The Alaska Sea Otter and Steller Sea Lion Commission  
505 W. Northern Lights Blvd, Suite 217  
Anchorage, AK 99503  
(907) 274-9799

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It is a pleasure to testify before the Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans. My name is Lianna Jack and I am the Executive Director of the Alaska Sea Otter & Steller Sea Lion Commission (TASSC). Our Commission was formerly known as the Alaska Sea Otter Commission. In 1998, our Commission added the statewide advocacy of Steller sea lions to our program. We are going into our 12th year of operation. We represent a total of 51 tribal organizations for sea otters, or sea otters and Steller sea lions.

Our goals are to ensure Alaska Native participation in sea otter and Steller sea lion management and to continue the customary use of marine mammals by Alaska Natives for Subsistence. We strongly believe that local participation in management will result in conservation that prevents a depleted listing under the MMPA due to subsistence harvest. Based on our goals, we developed regional management plans with Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Administration for Native Americans (ANA) grants.

Since then, we have signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and have entered into our third comanagement agreement. Development of the initial agreement, and for subsequent agreements with the Service has happened quickly. For the past three years, we have received \$70,000 for each year's agreement. At the direction of our Board, monies received from Section 119 have been used for our regions through the funding of research projects, such as the small boat survey; supply purchase; or direct contracts with communities. Our Staff, which includes Alaska Native biologists and Natural Resource specialists, actively work with the Service on research and management.

We work on biological and harvest-monitoring projects from subsistence harvested sea otters. To date, more than 300 samples have been collected. These samples have provided the basis to conduct a large-scale genetics study to address sea otter stock concerns. Additionally, we have developed a winter mortality survey protocol for sea otters which local people implement.

In the 1997 Comanagement Agreement we focused on developing Local Management Plans, and initiated one project on using local and traditional knowledge to document the growth and dispersement of sea otter in Southeast Alaskan waters. This project provides valuable information to resource users and scientists. The map will act as a guide as we develop a comprehensive stock survey for sea otters. The Local Management Plan developed by Sitka Tribe of Alaska (STA) has acted as model as other communities look to begin managing their subsistence resources. Ordinances that STA adopted, and a harvest monitoring program were developed from which STA is able to monitor their harvest of sea otters, and prevent the overutilization of the resource.

In the 1998 Comanagement Agreement we developed a small boat survey protocol and focused on training local people to conduct these surveys. The small boat survey protocol provides communities with the ability to develop their own population trends on the distribution and abundance of sea otters in their area. We worked with residents of Sitka, Cordova, Larson Bay and Port Graham/Nanwalek in a "train-the-trainers" program, where once trained, local people are enabled to train residents of other communities on the protocol. From this program, trainers have trained locals from Unalaska and Port Heiden. This agreement also allowed us to cooperatively address killer whale issues with the Service for the Aleutians. Through a survey, we attempted to document whether killer whales were preying on sea otters. With survey effort in False Pass, we received no documentation to substantiate this type of prey interaction.

In the 1999 Comanagement Agreement we are focusing efforts on the decline of sea otters in the Aleutians. In cooperation with researchers, our efforts will include standardizing the small boat survey protocol so that surveys conducted by local people will be the trends for population monitoring. Once the protocol is standardized, we plan on training communities in the Aleutians so their surveys will align with the historic surveys conducted by researchers in their area. We also are planning for local participation in the aerial survey planned for the Aleutian Archipelago this spring. Another area of interest is Port Heiden in the Bristol Bay area. This winter, due to heavy storms and extreme weather, the Bering Sea pack ice moved south and stranded otters. In response, we focused survey effort on the sea otter haul-out to assess mortality and extent.

While these projects have been successful and provided valuable management and biological information, we could do so much more, if the Service would receive the entire appropriation amount within Section 119 and our funding subsequently increased to \$310,000.

Since we took up Steller Sea Lion advocacy, we have communicated with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to negotiate and sign a comanagement agreement. At our last board meeting in February, NMFS met with our board to begin in earnest discussion on a comanagement agreement. We have planned a meeting next month for further discussions.

Comanagement activities will hopefully include projects that address sea lion issues and management and include local people to collect critical biological and ecological information.

We ask that TASSC is granted \$100,000 to implement projects we have discussed with the NMFS, which

include harvest monitoring, small boat surveys, biological sampling and mortality assessments.

We are a successful Commission in that we accomplish needed projects to help manage and conserve marine mammal populations. We are known for our productive record and tough but meaningful relationship with the Service. We hope to be given that opportunity by receiving continued funding for sea otters and designated funding for sea lions. Thank you again Mr. Chairman, for giving our Commission the opportunity to testify before this committee.

**Proposed projects include:**

***Sea otter: USFWS - \$ 310,000***

*Local Management Plans and Ordinances \$ 50,000*

Strengthening and expanding the Local Management Plans and Ordinances to allow for the tribal regulation and management of sea otter harvest

*Small Boat Survey \$ 120,000*

Expansion of the project to include additional communities

*Sea Otter Biosampling Program \$ 5,000*

Continuation of the Sea Otter Biological Sampling Program for the collection of tissue samples and baseline biological data

*Carcass Survey Program \$ 30,000*

Expansion of the Carcass Survey Program into additional communities for the assessment of sea otter mortality

*Local & Traditional Knowledge Survey \$ 20,000*

Expansion of the Local & Traditional Knowledge Survey focusing on the Alaska Peninsula and Kodiak Island

*GIS Mapping Project \$ 15,000*

Expansion of the GIS Mapping Project to allow for the layering and storage of data from the research programs.

*Targeted Aerial Surveys \$ 40,000*

Targeted aerial surveys to address critical populations or areas of concern, such as in Orca Inlet near Cordova, the Barren Islands, and the stretch of coastline between Cordova and Yakutat

*Contingency Fund \$ 15,000*

The continuation of a contingency fund is important to allow for the quick response to unanticipated

situations, such as the sea otter stranding in Port Heiden in the Bristol Bay area.

*Comanagement Operations \$ 15,000*

Funding of the implementation and development of comanagement operations.

***Steller sea lion: NMFS - \$ 100,000***

Harvest Monitoring Pilot Project \$ 30,000

Development of a pilot project for harvest monitoring of all marine mammals, including Steller sea lions, modeled after the FWS Marking & Tagging Program but which would be tribally authorized and enforced.

*Steller Sea Lion Biosampling Program \$ 10,000*

Development of a Steller sea lion Biological Sampling Program.

*Small Boat Survey \$ 20,000*

Modification of the Small Boat Survey protocol to account for the presence of all marine mammal species.

*Carcass Survey \$ 10,000*

Modification of the Carcass Survey protocol to collect morphological information and biological samples specific to Steller sea lions and used in ongoing research.

*GIS Program \$ 5,000*

Inclusion of Steller sea lion research and information in the TASSC GIS program.

*Steller sea lion quick response fund \$ 5,000*

To allow for the quick response to unanticipated situations regarding Steller sea lions.

*Traditional Knowledge Survey \$ 20,000*

Local and traditional knowledge survey to investigate changes in Steller sea lion diet over time.

Please see the attachments for more specifics regarding our existing programs.

# # # # #